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Conclusion: Critique and the Politics of Affirmation in International Relations

SUVI ALT

Affirmation refers to “something declared to be true; a positive statement or judgement”¹ or “a statement of the existence or truth of something”.² The question of affirmation thus takes us back to the problem of truth. What is the truth that is proclaimed when affirmation is declared? The contemporary interest in affirmation in the humanities and social sciences offers various answers to this question and the contributions to this special issue reflect some of that diversity. Pol Bargañés-Pedreny refers to affirmation as an “ethos”.³ As such, affirmation is understood as a general mode of relating to the contemporary reality. What is being affirmed is not necessarily the truth of this or that thing, but the current reality as such. Affirmation means embracing the world. But how do we understand the world? For those currently working in the affirmative key, the reality that is affirmed is often understood in terms of its inherently unstable, indeterminate, interrelated, and messy character.⁴ In such accounts, affirmation means positing an ontology that arguably allows us to see possibilities that have previously gone unnoticed because we have not been attuned to how the world is. Such affirmation of notions regarding the character of being as such differs from affirming the truth of specific phenomena—actual experiences of injustice, for example. Moreover, affirming the actually existing world has different political effects than the affirmation of political goals—social equality, for example. All of these notions of affirmation, and perhaps others, appear in current debates concerning the need to do something *other* than critique or something *more* than critique.

1. American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, “Affirmation”, (2011), available: <<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/affirmation>> (accessed 21 May 2018).

2. Collins English Dictionary—Complete and Unabridged, “Affirmation”, (2014), available: <<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/affirmation>> (accessed 21 May 2018).

3. Pol Bargañés-Pedreny, “From Critique to Affirmation in International Relations”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

4. See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015). Contemporary affirmative writers often draw on the various formulations of ontologies of immanence in the works of Baruch de Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Gilles Deleuze. For a short explication of the practice of “affirmative critique”, see, Kathrin Thiele, “Affirmation”, in Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele (eds.), *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2017), pp. 25–29.

While most of the contributors to this issue focus on the operation of the affirmative ethos in contemporary political thought, some also identify it being expressed in different policy discourses. Peter Finkenbusch finds resilience discourse in crime-related US security interventions in Latin America affirming the current world instead of aiming to change it. In these policies, fostering resilience is not about developing one-size-fits-all technical solutions, but about identifying “the unscripted, improvised, evolving practices of real people in their everyday life situations”.⁵ Pol Barga  s-Pedreny and Jessica Schmidt identify the same kind of a shift in environmental policymaking. Here, too, it is no longer about developing grand strategies with preconceived ideas about how policy problems should be solved. Instead, environmental policy is characterised by the proliferation of projects and experimentations.⁶ This change in policy-making is partly due to the waning belief in the effectiveness of grand plans. Finkenbusch points out the way in which the energy and self-confidence underlying the liberal-universalist War on Drugs have dissipated, creating the need for a different approach. Barga  s-Pedreny and Schmidt, likewise, draw attention to the loss of confidence in our ability to solve the problem of climate change. Yet, Barga  s-Pedreny and Schmidt are also optimistic concerning the possibilities that exist even in the midst of a loss of confidence. The current, more affirmative approach, they argue, is enthusiastic about the possibilities of action but does not promise to solve the problems that we are facing: “what is being done matters less than the idea that something is being done, that something happens, moves”.⁷ This is an affirmation of action in the present without guarantee of results or success.

While Barga  s-Pedreny and Schmidt understand affirmation as opening up new possibilities, for Finkenbusch, resilience discourse ultimately “welcomes the world the way it is” and therefore fails to go beyond neoliberalism.⁸ Similarly, David Chandler shows how the bulk of current approaches to the Anthropocene does not challenge the present or offer possibilities for alternative futures. Instead, they affirm the world as it currently exists. In the Anthropocene, critique comes to appear as a limited way of engaging with the world because the parameters within which critique used to be practiced arguably no longer exist.⁹ The distinction between the present and an “outside” or an “away” that enables critique—at least the modern variant of it that Chandler focuses on—is arguably not tenable anymore. Instead, the truth that we are called on to affirm is that humans have created the problem of the Anthropocene but it is not ours to solve. The Anthropocene cannot be fixed—it has to be affirmed.

Chandler uses Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) to identify some of the characteristics of the current “ethos of affirmation”. Tsing’s book is indeed very fitting for illustrating some of the problems of this ethos. While Tsing’s ethnography of the matsutake mushroom commerce is wonderfully rich, the book’s argument concerning “life in capitalist ruins” is based

5. Peter Finkenbusch, “On the Road to Affirmation: Facilitating Urban Resilience in the Americas”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

6. Pol Barga  s-Pedreny and Jessica Schmidt, “Learning to be Postmodern in an All Too Modern World: ‘Whatever Action’ in International Climate Change Imaginaries”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

7. *Ibid.*

8. Finkenbusch, *op. cit.*

9. David Chandler, “The Transvaluation of Critique in the Anthropocene”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

on an affirmation of precarity that strangely both acknowledges and disregards the role that precarity plays in sustaining contemporary capitalism. Tsing recognises the precarious conditions that commercial mushroom pickers live in. Yet, this does not lead her to a political analysis or a critical questioning of the operation of the contemporary global economy. Instead, she suggests embracing precarity as a fundamental condition of existence.

We hear about precarity in the news every day. People lose their jobs or get angry because they never had them. Gorillas and river porpoises hover at the edge of extinction. Rising seas swamp whole Pacific islands. But most of the time we imagine such precarity to be an exception to how the world works. It's what "drops out" from the system. What if, as I'm suggesting, precarity is the condition of our time—or, to put it another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity?¹⁰

Tsing suggests that everything is indeterminate, in flux, and evolving, and she is expecting this to "sound odd" to the reader because we have presumably assumed capitalism to operate through uniformity, homogenisation, and standardisation. Affirming diversity, contingency, precarity, and surprise is Tsing's answer to homogenisation. To make the most of it, we need to approach precarity with curiosity and imagination: "Precarious living is always an adventure".¹¹ While Tsing appears to think of her approach as revolutionary, it is reproducing a conception of life that is entirely compatible with and, indeed, promoted and produced by the way in which contemporary capitalism operates. Neoliberal capitalism is predicated on the proliferation and appropriation of difference. The neoliberal economy is in a constant state of emergency from which it does not even try to escape. Instead, it spontaneously organises itself in it.¹² Being secured as a subject of neoliberalism means accepting that the environment in which one lives is contingent and precarious, and therefore requires constant reshaping of the self. Crucial for this is that the need to recognise contingency concerns not only what we can or cannot know of the world or of its future, but also the way in which people need to conceive of their own *life* in a rapidly changing world. To survive in what is taken to be an increasingly contingent world, contingency has to be accepted as constitutive of one's subjectivity.¹³

Part of the appeal of the notions of contingency and indeterminacy is that they appear to reflect the vital dynamic of life. Particularly as a consequence of the shift from Newtonian and Darwinian science to complexity science, "life" has come to be understood as self-organising, open, adaptive, and contingent. Biological life is conceived as being constantly exposed to deviances that threaten its equilibrium.¹⁴ In the time of climate change, we are made more aware of this than ever.

10. Tsing, *op cit.*, p. 20.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

12. See Brian Massumi, "National Enterprise Emergency: Steps Toward an Ecology of Powers", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (2009), pp. 153–185.

13. For an extended version of this argument, see Suvi Alt, "Beyond the Biopolitics of Capability and Choice in Human Development: Being, Decision and World", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2015), pp. 69–88.

14. Maria Muhle, "A Genealogy of Biopolitics: The Notion of Life in Canguilhem and Foucault", in Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter (eds.), *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 86.

Furthermore, if it is true that the Anthropocene has made it impossible to distinguish between humans and the environment, then presumably this also means that it is equally implausible to distinguish between biological and socio-political concepts. Yet, the implications of uncritically affirming the truth of notions deriving from the natural sciences as the truth of our political and social existence should give us pause. If science has shown “life” to be contingent, open, and self-organising, we should still question the political implications of assuming this to be a generalised ontological condition also politically and socially. In the contemporary political economy, an uncritical affirmation of the contingency of life reinforces the status quo instead of challenging it.¹⁵ Hence, the way in which various performances of affirmative critique “linger in the space of indeterminacy”¹⁶ does not have the kind of disruptive or subversive impact that authors such as Tsing assume it to have.

A further problem with claiming that we are living in “a global state of precarity” and that we need to understand “precarity as an earthwide condition”¹⁷ is the obvious point that not everyone is equally precarious. Precarity and vulnerability are distributed in highly unequal ways, and approaches that seek to affirm them as some kind of a generalised ontological truth risk missing actually existing social, economic, and political conditions: If everything is open, contingent, and “moving”, how are patterns of inequality so persistent? Doerthe Rosenow argues that decolonial thought makes important contributions in this regard. On the one hand, decolonial approaches strive towards “an affirmation of the plurality and complexity of what is”.¹⁸ On the other hand, decolonial thought is also a project of critique, understood in terms of “an analysis of actual (historical) structures of domination”.¹⁹ Prioritising affirmation should thus never come at the expense of analysing actually existing relations of domination. In other words, both critique and affirmation are needed.

In Joe Hoover’s piece, affirmation is portrayed differently but his conclusion is similar to Rosenow’s. Hoover develops an approach to global justice that involves both an affirmation of the lived experience of injustice and a critique of the power relations that shape those experiences. Such an approach requires us “to consider how the distribution of power and privilege leads to injustice, and how its redistribution is necessary for global justice”.²⁰ As such, Hoover’s approach conceives of affirmation as being necessarily connected to an ongoing process of critique and as having a specific object. Here, affirmation is not so much a general ethos but rather a call to take seriously the experiences of those who suffer from domination and oppression.

The attention to structural and social relations that Hoover calls for is precisely what Kai Koddenbrock and Mario Schmidt identify as going missing in the current affirmative turn. Koddenbrock and Schmidt argue that affirmation often

15. See Alt, *op. cit.*

16. Ned Dostaler, “On Hope and Indeterminacy”, *Dialogues, Cultural Anthropology* (June 2017), available: <<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1131-on-hope-and-indeterminacy>> (accessed 10 August 2018).

17. Tsing, *op. cit.*, pp. 4–6.

18. Doerthe Rosenow, “Decolonising the Decolonisers? Of Ontological Encounters in the GMO Controversy and Beyond”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

19. *Ibid.*

20. Joe Hoover, “Developing a Situationist Global Justice Theory: From an Architectonic to a Consummatory Approach”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

comes in the form of the acceptance of a loss of one's world. A good example of this is Roy Scranton's popular book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015) which suggests that living in the Anthropocene means learning how to die: "Learning to die means learning to let go of the ego, the idea of the self, the future, certainty, attachment, the pursuit of pleasure, permanence, stability. Learning to let go of salvation. Learning to let go of hope".²¹ As Koddenbrock and Schmidt suggest, affirmation then appears as "a leap of faith towards an unknown undertaken not because that unknown is inherently promising, but because what one knows already has been or allegedly is destroyed".²² Yet, there is a crucial political problem in the cases that Koddenbrock and Schmidt analyse: The leap of faith towards the unknown is to be taken based on the revelation provided by a preacher-like figure, rather than relying on the idea that the changing character of the world is accessible to everyone through a critical engagement with it.²³

Hence, in some of the moves of the affirmative turn, social and historical relations and even human action disappear, and truth becomes something that is revealed simply by referring to its encompassing presence.²⁴ Yet, as Koddenbrock and Schmidt point out, forms of critique are themselves historical, emerging from a movement between human thought and its social and material conditions.²⁵ The interesting question then is, what is it about the present that has made affirmation appear as the most (or even the only) plausible mode of approaching the world. Koddenbrock and Schmidt do not pursue this question very far but they note the 1990s and 2000s' depoliticisation and acceptance of "there is no alternative" as playing a role here. Additionally, and perhaps even more obviously, the current perception of "there is no choice" comes from a recognition of "the reality of the planet".²⁶ The "new planetary real" is arguably such that some freedoms and political choices cannot, or must not, be available to us anymore.²⁷

The discourses of necessity that have pervaded both economics and ecology—and interestingly coexist with the ontologies of contingency and indeterminacy—go some way towards explaining the conditions of possibility of the turn to affirmation. This attention to conditions of possibility of course betrays my allegiance to "the tired routines of most social theories", as Bruno Latour puts it.²⁸ While the critical attitude is "a flight into the conditions of possibility of a given matter of fact", Latour's alternative is an inquiry into "how many participants are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence".²⁹ For Latour, an interest

21. Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015), p. 92.

22. Kai Koddenbrock and Mario Schmidt "Against Understanding: The Techniques of Shock and Awe in Jesuit Theology, Neoliberal Thought and Timothy Morton's Philosophy of Hyperobjects", *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. See Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Daniel J. Levine, "Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2016), pp. 499–523.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 507. For a critique of this position, see David Chandler, Erika Cudworth, and Stephen Hobden, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Liberal Cosmopolitan IR: A Response to Burke et al.' 'Planet Politics'", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2017), pp. 190–208.

28. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30 (Winter 2004), p. 245.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 246. Original emphases.

in the conditions of possibility of facts has meant moving away from facts, when we should be moving closer to them. The latter would mean creating, assembling, and composing, instead of debunking, undermining, and judging things. An echo of such a form of critique can also be found in Michel Foucault's reflections on the role of the critic:

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes—all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.³⁰

While Foucault's ethos here is quite similar to that of those who now prefer affirmation to critique, for others, this quote is probably a reminder of what was wrong with poststructuralist critique in the first place. Approaches drawing on some form of Marxist legacy will have similar problems with contemporary calls for affirmation as they did with the forms of poststructuralist critique that draw on Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other related thinkers. What Koddenbrock calls "the paralysis of large parts of 'radical' IR"³¹ is then due not to too much critique and too little affirmation but rather a consequence of the limits of the notions of critique that are currently prevalent. Koddenbrock locates these limits in Latourian and Foucauldian approaches' unwillingness to recognise totality and to engage in a totalising strategy of critique. This means that they are not able to grasp the systemic logics of capitalism because they focus on contingent details and unstable assemblages, refusing to engage with capitalism *as such*. Furthermore, following Karl Marx and Theodor Adorno, Koddenbrock emphasises that totality is a critical category—not an affirmative one.³² The character of capitalist social totality is a *problem* to be overcome, not a truth to be embraced.

In Gideon Baker's reading of the limits of critique, both those action-oriented critiques that pass judgement on the world and those deconstructive ones that refrain from doing so remain caught in the metaphysical problem of government that Christianity has bequeathed to Western thought.³³ For Baker, critique is limited because it judges the world according to a measure that exists outside the world. The discrepancy between the actually existing world and the ideal world is what invites governance. While Chandler sees the notion of an "outside" or an "away" as enabling critique, Baker points out that this necessarily also produces governance. Affirmation, on the contrary, rejects nothing in the world and it adds nothing onto the world but it is nevertheless transformative.³⁴ How exactly

30. Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher", in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 323.

31. Kai Koddenbrock, "Strategies of Critique in International Relations: From Foucault and Latour Towards Marx", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2015), p. 257.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

33. Gideon Baker, "Critique, Use and World in Giorgio Agamben's Genealogy of Government", *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

this happens cannot be articulated within the parameters of what would generally be recognised as politics because this would require relying on a notion of a meta-physical subject acting on the world, which reproduces rather than solves the problem of governance. Baker is thus going further than his Foucauldian colleagues for whom the problem would rather be one of “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them”.³⁵ Rather, the problem here is governance *as such*.

While the form of critique that Baker is primarily taking issue with relies on judgement, much of poststructuralist critique, often drawing on Foucault, has either explicitly or implicitly refrained from understanding critique as a form of judgement. Nevertheless, Baker’s affirmation is not concerned with poststructuralism’s alternative to judgement: the deconstructive attention to difference; that which confounds any final order. According to Baker, such critique, too, remains caught in conceiving of the world as somehow more than what it appears to be. Instead, the world is to be affirmed as being nothing but its modes of being. But how could such an account avoid the status quo preserving effect of affirmation that many of the other authors of this special issue point out? And how does this account allow for addressing the problems—domination, inequality, injustice—that have also been raised? As far as those problems are seen as having their origins in historically specific social, political, and economic forces, it is difficult to see how they could be addressed through this form of affirmation in any immediate way. Nevertheless, the problem is also posed differently here. Baker suggests that affirmation does not reproduce the status quo when it operates through the new use of that which exists. Drawing the concept of “use” from Giorgio Agamben, Baker argues that use does not arrive from outside the current world but neither does it simply amount to a repetition of the same. Free use opens up modes of being in a way that is transformative but not premised on the “must-be” of action-oriented critique.³⁶ While Baker leaves the practical applications of such “free use” largely in suspense, Agamben’s examples of it include play, dance, and poetry. “Rendering inoperative the biological, economic, and social operations, they show what the human body can do, opening it to a new possible use”, Agamben explains.³⁷ Although Agamben’s discussion of use is largely focused on aesthetic forms of existence, he nevertheless argues that use has the potential to deactivate the powers of economics, law, and politics.³⁸ To this end, “we must always wrest from the apparatuses—from all apparatuses—the possibility of use that they have captured”, Agamben states.³⁹ Nevertheless, Agamben, too, remains relatively silent when it comes to considering the systemic, social, political, and economic conditions within which such use is to take place.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?”, in Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), *The Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 44. Original emphasis.

36. Baker, *op. cit.*

37. Giorgio Agamben, “What is a Destituent Power?”, trans. Stephanie Wakefield, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2014), p. 70.

38. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 76.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Conclusion

While it is both the modernist forms of critique and deconstruction that are now considered as limited, and “affirmation” is put forward as a solution to their shortcomings, we should remember that these approaches also contained their own notions of affirmation. Modernist critique was premised on affirming the truth of values such as progress, emancipation, or freedom, while Derrida, conversely, saw the work of deconstruction in terms of an affirmation that aims to pass beyond “man”, “humanism”, “foundation”, and “origin”. This “affirmation of the play of the world [...] determines the noncenter as otherwise than as loss of the center”.⁴⁰ Deconstruction, thus, contributed to “an affirmation of the world in its unpredictability, contingency and interdependency”.⁴¹ In this regard, contemporary calls for affirmation seem closer to the ethos of deconstructive critique than to its modernist counterpart. The affirmation of the contingency of life and world is one of the points where various contemporary posthuman and new materialist approaches converge with their poststructuralist predecessors. It is not always easy to see how contemporary affirmation necessarily even substantively differs from poststructuralist critique, apart from claims that it is more attuned to the material and somehow less pessimistic and less withdrawn.

In fact, one key aspect of the affirmative approach appears to be its more positive “mood”.⁴² While moods should generally not be conflated with affects, for the purposes of this text, it is worth remembering that in cultural and social theory, the “affirmative turn” has been closely connected to the “turn to affect”. In this regard, we might briefly highlight the work of Rosi Braidotti as well as Sara Ahmed’s critique of it as a reminder of some of the possible pitfalls of affirmation. In general terms, Braidotti’s affirmative politics is about “trusting the untapped possibilities” that exist in the present historical situation.⁴³ She posits a vitalist, materialist, relational ontology that affirms movement, process, and becoming. A key element of her politics is an “ethics of joy and affirmation” that functions through the transformation of negative affects into positive ones.⁴⁴ “Joyful or positive passions and the transcendence of reactive affects are the desirable mode”, Braidotti explains.⁴⁵ This means that subjects are to pursue self-transformation in ways that affirm positivity. Bad feelings are framed here as obstacles, as that which gets in the way of subjects getting beyond.⁴⁶ Ahmed suggests that Braidotti is too quick to seek the transformation of pain and hurt to positivity. Instead, we should aim to produce critical understandings of the reasons why some bodies are more vulnerable to harm than others. According to Ahmed, affirmative ethics underestimates the difficulty of giving sustained attention to suffering and it allows historical forms of injustice to disappear from view.⁴⁷

40. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 369.

41. James J. Dencso, “Deconstruction and the Philosophy of Religion: World Affirmation and Critique”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1992), p. 36.

42. Bargañes-Pedreny and Schmidt, *op. cit.*

43. Braidotti, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Rosi Braidotti, “Affirmation Versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates”, *Symposium*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2006), p. 238.

46. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 215.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

In other words, affirmation as a “positive mood” risks repeating the same problem as the affirmation of precarity, contingency, and indeterminacy. Affirmation—even if it is the affirmation of becoming, of change, of multiplicity, and so on—is insufficient if it remains oblivious to its own conditions of possibility. Yet, my purpose is not to discourage those fellow academics who long for something more positive, optimistic, and joyful than the forms of critique that we are used to. But insofar as the turn to affirmation is not just about the mood with which one conducts one’s scholarly praxis but also involves a more general conception of subjects’ way of relating to the world and to each other, it is important to note that affirmation may also come at a price. The affirmation of the unstable, indeterminate, interrelated, and precarious character of present life and world is at once also an affirmation of neoliberal capitalism. This does not mean that the former is nothing but the latter. But it does mean that the “affirmative ethos” is easily co-opted if it does not come with a critical analysis of existing relations of power and domination. None of this is meant to diminish the importance of affirmation. In fact, affirmation is crucial for political praxis. Rather, I suggest that we need to pay attention to what truth is affirmed and with what political effects, particularly when affirmation is referred to as an “ethos”, a “mood”, or a “spirit”.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

About the Author

Suvi Alt is an Assistant Professor in History and Theory of International Relations at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Her research examines contemporary biopolitics of development and notions of a “beyond” of the biopolitical. Her broader research interests include international political theory as well as critical perspectives on development and environmental politics. Her work has been published in several journals and edited volumes in the fields of international relations, political theory, and cultural studies.